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CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM OF CARLYLE'S *FRENCH REVOLUTION**

Carlyle's literary career began in the *Edinburgh Review*, under Jeffrey, with an essay on Jean Paul Richter. This was followed, on the same friendly patron's suggestion, by essays on other German topics, and by translations of German romances. Carlyle first became known, therefore, as an interpreter of German literature, and particularly as a disciple of Richter. In the form of books, he gave to the world first the *Life of Schiller*, which received the high praise of Goethe—than which no praise could have been more acceptable to the young author. *Sartor Resartus* followed, first in America and, three years later, in England. Its original publication in *Fraser's Magazine* was stopped because of the protests of patrons, and its republication in book form in England was, for the time, out of the question. This remarkable production was eyed askance and little noticed in the public press. It assuredly contributed nothing to Carlyle's good fortune. The *French Revolution* was his first book to give him real distinction as an author. It is my purpose here to show how that work was first received by the reviewers.

The book began as early as 1833 to occupy Carlyle's mind, as his letters of that year inform us. For the next three years, until its appearance early in 1837, we hear of it much in his correspondence with his brothers, his mother, and with Emerson. We are indeed kept well informed as to its progress, its difficulties, and its fortunes: for not the least interesting event of its history befell it while it was in the manuscript stage. The story of John Stuart Mill's mishap with the first volume is possibly as well known as any of a similar kind in literary history—largely, no doubt, because of Carlyle's own vivid telling of it, and Mrs. Carlyle's too. But the loss having been heroically repaired, the work was finally, through many agonies, brought to completion,

* *The French Revolution*, by Thomas Carlyle. In three volumes. London: Fraser, 1837. Republished, Boston: Little & Brown, 1838. Second edition, 1839. Price of first edition, £1. 11s. 6d.

at ten o'clock at night, January the 12th, 1837. It appeared from the press early in May, 1837. We may first hear the author's judgment upon his own work—we shall find none more interesting, none more just and instructive. In a letter to Sterling, January 17, 1837, he writes:—

The Bookseller has it, and the Printer has it; I expect the first sheet tomorrow: in not many weeks more, I can hope to wash my hands of it forever and a day. It is a thing disgusting to me by the faults of it; the merits of which, for it is not without merits, will not be seen for a long time. It is a wild savage Book, itself a kind of French Revolution; which perhaps, if Providence have so ordered it, the world had better *not* accept when offered it? With all my heart! What I do know of it is that it has come hot out of my own soul; born in blackness, whirlwind and sorrow; that no man, for a long while, has stood speaking so completely alone under the Eternal Azure, in the character of man only; or is likely for a long while so to stand: finally that it has come as near to choking the life out of me as any task I should like to undertake for some years to come; which also is an immense comfort, indeed the greatest of all.¹

Carlyle's judgment upon his own work is always interesting; upon this early work it is especially so. Here we have a thoroughly Carlylese description of it: "born in blackness, whirlwind and sorrow"; and "what I do know is that it has come hot out of my own soul." In February, 1837, he writes to his brother, Dr. Carlyle, then in Rome, in a similar strain:—

I find on 'a general view' that the Book is one of the *savagest* written for several centuries: it is a Book written by a *wild man*, a man disunited from the fellowship of the world he lives in; looking King and beggar in the face with an indifference of brotherhood, an indifference of contempt,—that is really very extraordinary in a respectable country. The critic of a respectable nature cannot but be loud; *falls er nicht schweigt*, which really I shall be well content that he do. But I think he will not. In that case,

¹ *New Letters of Thomas Carlyle*, edited and annotated by Alexander Carlyle, with illustrations. In two volumes. London and New York, 1904 Vol. I, p. 50.

I will grant him free scope : there is no word in his belly harder than the word *it* utters, by implication or directly, about him and his.²

Here the author is humorously fancying the mystification it will produce in the critic's brain. He fully anticipates an outcry, if not a shriek, from respectability. He was not to be disappointed, as we shall see. April the 28th, 1837, the author writes to his mother :—

The printing is entirely done ; I suppose the Book will be out before many days.³

The 22nd of September he writes :—

They make a great talk about the Book ; which seems to have succeeded in a far higher degree than I looked for. I have not got to Fraser yet to hear what his report is ; but everybody is astonished at every other body's being pleased with this wonderful performance !⁴

A second edition was not needed until 1846, but in 1847 a third edition followed. We shall now see what the critical journals that took notice of the book had to say of it.

The *Athenæum*, May 20, 1837, contained a six-column review that may be taken as fairly representing the exasperation which the style of the work produced in the minds of the respectable critics alluded to by Carlyle, as quoted above. The writer begins in the following strain :—

Originality of thought is unquestionably the best excuse for writing a book ; originality of style is a rare and a refreshing quality ; but it is paying rather dear for one's whistle to qualify for obtaining it in the university of Bedlam. Originality, without justness of thought, is but novelty of error ; and originality of style, without sound taste and discretion, is sheer affectation.

After a column of such disquisition on thought and style in general, the foregone application to the book announced for review

² Ibid, pp. 55-6.

³ Ibid, p. 74.

⁴ Ibid, p. 79.

is made. The author's contributions to periodical literature, the writer affirms, had already made him known as an essayist who had an unusual fondness for oddities of style, "but," he continues, "it is one thing to put forth a few pieces of quaintness, neologism, and a whimsical coxcombry; and another, to carry such questionable qualities through three long volumes of misplaced persiflage and flippant pseudo-philosophy." The critic cannot find language with which to express adequately his disapprobation of the peculiarities and whimsicalities of style of the book before him. He might be able to endure these mannerisms if they occurred in something like moderation, but there is "a transcendental excess" of them, they go to a pitch of extravagance and absurdity which he finds intolerable. He judges the author to have made "an attempt to engraft the idiom of Germany into the King's English, and to transfuse the vague verbiage and affected sentimentality of a sect of Germans into our simple and intelligible philosophy." This is deemed to be nothing less than treason, and wanton crime.

The critic having done his duty by the author's style, concedes that the book is not altogether bad; there are "many finely conceived passages, and many just and vigorous reflections." "Amidst an all-pervading absurdity of mannerism, there are passages of great power, and occasionally of splendid though impure eloquence." All this reads exceedingly like the criticisms of Browning's earlier productions. But the critic of the *Athenæum* was far more lenient toward *Paracelsus* than toward the *French Revolution*, though he was equally perplexed by the defacing mannerisms and the wilful obscurities of the two great productions.

The *Literary Gazette*, May 27, 1837, began its review with the following expression of dumbfoundedness such as Carlyle expected from the critic of a respectable nature:—

Of this strange work we hardly know how to speak. To treat of it seriously is impracticable; and yet there are portions of it of such an order, that we find it equally impossible to laugh at it. Caricaturing the worst manner of the worst part of the worst German school, Mr. Carlyle out-

Richters Ritcher, and robs Paul to the last farthing without satisfying Peter, or any body else, with the plunder. He calls his performance *The French Revolution*; but it is more than that: it is a triple revolution:—1st, allowing the French Revolution to be *one*; 2nd, there is the Revolution of Mr. Carlyle, *two*; and 3rd, the Revolution of the English Language, *three*!

This respectable critic is more than nonplussed; his moral sensibilities are shocked. The author gloats over suffering, mocks at the ruin of social institutions, it is all a "sad trifling" with scenes of destruction and horror. It is "revolting to taste and 'feeling': "the very titles of his chapters are like grinning and hideous laughs at mortality and mortal sufferings." Furthermore, it is no history, through the perversity of the writer, but only "rhapsodical snatches."

After this general condemnation, extended passages are quoted, with the capitalization and punctuation of the original retained, the writer notes, for special disapproval. Then the reviewer concludes with this paragraph:—

Classical absurdities; multitudes of new-coined words; and concocted phrases; illustrations which darken, and expositions which perplex; and a hundred other bewildering follies crush the sense of this work in every page. It is only a literary curiosity, and rather a tiresome one.

Fraser's Magazine, as was to be expected, contained a most favorable review (July, 1837). *Sartor Resartus* had appeared, in part at least, in its columns, and on the whole its editor recognized the merits of Carlyle as a new force in literature. His review of the *French Revolution* was elaborate and masterful. Of course he had to guard against the suspicion of championing a contributor and of endeavoring to "write up" a book published by the house. It is in the writer's method of preventing such a possible suspicion that the masterfulness of the article displays itself. For he sets himself at first to understand and explain Carlyle. It is some time, several pages, before the book itself is reached, and when it is reached we still have no eulogium. Commendation is rather implied than asserted. But at length, on the tenth page of the review, the book is made a

touchstone of the minds that undertake its perusal. On this matter the reviewer thus expresses himself:—

And we would say, that every man who fails to understand and appreciate this book (We write with a consciousness of all the difficulties that belong to its peculiar style), gives evidence in such failure of a want of discipline, both intellectual and moral; without which no history, of any kind, is suitable reading for him. We write advisedly, and in sober seriousness; and solemnly, earnestly, and with tender regard for his welfare here and hereafter—whether he be critic or simply one of the town, in or out of the *Literary Gazette*, or *Athenæum*—we apply this book as a test, whereby his intellectual and moral quality shall be gauged, and its amount accurately determined.

The character of the work is clearly discerned by the writer and is set forth as follows:—

Consider that the earliest historians were poets; and deprive them of their rhymes, and you have the kind of historian—the prose poet, so to speak, which Mr. Carlyle was desirous of becoming. As Immanuel Kant's philosophe was called critical, this history of Thomas Carlyle's may by termed æsthetical.

Such being the idea of the composition; in its realization you find the author not dealing in dissertations and carefully selected narratives, but you are at once thrown dramatically, or epically, into the midst of things,—and groups of character rise up chronologically, as they appeared on the stage of real life,—not accompanied with a written character labelled on their breasts, but speaking, acting, and evolving individual character in speech and action.

The article concludes, after twenty-five pages of analysis and interpretation, with this defense of the style:—

When excellencies like these abound, the reader will forgive the author's Latinity and inversion of words in some of his sentences, which has been considered, but erroneously and absurdly to be a German-English style of composition. It is simply a reflex of the writer's modes of thought, and the result of a studied concision, adopted expressly for concentrating the sense upon an emphatic word, so placed, as to compel the reader to pause in its enunciation, and weigh its whole import and signification.

This critic is solitary in the view which he here expresses of the style, but is he wrong? The truth is generally found in a compromise.

The *Westminster Review* has an article which occupies pp. 17-53 of its July number, 1837, commending the work in terms of the highest admiration. The writer, who signs himself "A," begins thus:—

This is not so much a history, as an epic poem; and notwithstanding or even in consequence of this, the truest of histories. It is the history of the French Revolution, and the poetry of it, both in one; and on the whole no work of greater genius, either historical or poetical has been produced in this country for many years.

Opinion, the writer predicts, will be very much divided on the book for some time, and the dominant talk about it will be temporarily disparaging: this because of its "distinguished originality." But "the suffrages of a large portion of the very best qualified judges will be given, even enthusiastically, in favor of the volumes." The style of writing, however, is condemned. Some of its peculiarities are "mere mannerisms," and its phraseology is borrowed in a measure "from the spiritualist school of German poets and metaphysicians." The transcendentalism of the book, its "dicta about the mystery and infinitude which are in the universe and in man," are likely to be stumbling-blocks to many readers. Nevertheless, even in style the author is incomparably superior to the favorite historians. In his mode of presentation he is classed rather with Schiller and Shakespeare than with Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon. On the character of his work two quotations will indicate the reviewer's judgment:—

Mr. Carlyle has been the first to show that all which is done for history by the best historical play, by Schiller's *Wallenstein*, for example, or Vitet's admirable trilogy, may be done in a strictly true narrative, in which every incident rests on irrefragable authority; may be done, by means merely of an apt selection and a judicious grouping of authentic facts.

And again, speaking of the author's power to make dim historical figures real, breathing, acting personages:—

This quality, so often pointed out as distinctive of Shakespeare's plays, distinguishes Mr. Carlyle's history. Never before did we take up a book calling itself by that name, a book treating of past times, and professing to be true, and find ourselves actually among human beings. We at once felt, that what had been to us mere abstractions, had become realities; the forms of 'things unknown,' which we fancied we knew, but knew their names merely, were, for the first time, with most startling effect, 'bodied forth and turned into shape.' Other historians talk to us indeed of human beings; but what do they place before us?

But this imaginative power is not the author's only remarkable gift. He has, what rarely goes with the poetic temperament, a gift, so to speak, for drudgery. "A more pains-taking or accurate investigator of facts and sifter of testimonies," says the reviewer, "never wielded the historical pen."

The writer's summary regarding author and book stands thus:—

Thus endowed, and having a theme the most replete with every kind of human interest, epic, tragic, elegiac, even comical and farcical, which history affords, and so near to us withal, that the authentic details of it are still attainable; need it be said, that he has produced a work which deserves to be memorable? a work which, whatever may be its immediate reception, 'will not willingly be let die'; whose reputation will be a growing reputation, its influence rapidly felt, for it will be read by the writers; and perhaps every historical work of any note, which shall hereafter be written in this country, will be different from what it would have been if this book were not.

The *Literary Examiner*, September 17, 1837, speaks of the work in a way similar to that of the *Westminster Review*. The writer evidently was not one of the "respectable" class. He begins thus: "This is one of the few books of our time that are likely to live for some generations beyond it." The writer then describes its probable reception, predicting that it will be very much let alone for several years, but that it will finally establish itself. Then follows a characterization of the work which reveals

a clear comprehension of its true nature, a judgment agreeing on the whole with the accepted one at the present time:—

Mr. Carlyle has, in these volumes, written a book of unquestionable originality and genius. It is a book conceived in the Epic spirit, and written from the innermost heart of the writer. Everything in it is fresh and real, and it has all the fervor, exaltation, and impressiveness of poetry.

Carlyle himself, as we have seen, said that his book had 'come hot out of his own soul.' The reviewer had discerned that fact. The imaginative power of the author is recognized in the following sentences: "We are placed by him in the minds and situations of the actors and sufferers in the French Revolution." This is very different from "sad trifling"! The optimism of the book receives full justice; ethical force and philosophical soundness are ascribed to it. As regards the style the reviewer thus writes:—

It is not to be forgotten that this is a history of a very different type from any that has yet been attempted in our language and in which the usually approved style of historical narrative, the nervous simplicity of Hume, or the gorgeous march of Gibbon, would have been, not to say misplaced, but actually impossible of application. Every original thing must speak its own language. Consider the work as much a poem as a history, and the singular groupings and inversions of words will no longer seem singular—consider it as an intense outpouring of the heart of a great thinker made in the manner of a soliloquy as of one thinking aloud—do anything that will reconcile you to a style which is at first very strange and unusual—reckon it worth some labor, and be content to make some sacrifice of leisure and of taste—rather than throw down one of the most remarkable books of our age in an ignorant, short-sighted, and despicable disgust.

It is true the critic would have the style altered in places, especially where quiet narrative is required, but in the major portion of the book he would not change a word.

It is the very language of the season and the men, rivetting breathless attention, and, in the midst of scenes of the sorest affliction on humanity, stirring the deepest yearnings of the affections.

The *Monthly Repository*, September, 1837, edited by Leigh Hunt, contains a brief, but important, estimate of the book. It begins with this sentence :—

There is no account of the French Revolution that can be in the slightest degree compared with this for intensity of feeling and profoundness of thought.

The style is lamented as being "uncompromisingly German," but the complaints against the author of unintelligibility on this score are very "shallow and ridiculous." The imaginative power of the work is described as follows :—

If a man wishes to go through the Revolution with feelings analogous to those who suffered in it, who wept in it, who hoped in it, who were driven deeply to reflect in it, and who ended by concluding that there was good in its worst evil, and a tear due to every sufferer, but not virtue or settled manhood enough in the light and joyous French character to bring the question to its noblest close, here let him suffer and be exalted, and be depressed, and awakened into the widest thoughts upon the nature of himself and his duties with the most thoughtful heart now speaking among men.

One of the most notable reviews of the *French Revolution* was that of Thackeray, which appeared in the *Times*, August the 3rd, 1837. Thackeray was as yet an almost unknown hack-writer—Carlyle, apropos of the review, refers to him as "one Thackeray." But the article is extremely significant, as being the recognition by one man of yet unacknowledged genius of another, before whom was a still harder battle for his true place in the world of letters. The review, furthermore, is instructive as giving an account of the various impressions which the book had made and of its consequently various reception by the public press. Upon this topic it begins, as follows :—

Since the appearance of this work, within the last two months, it has raised among the critics and the reading public a strange storm of applause and discontent. To hear one party you would fancy that the author was but a dull madman, nidulging in wild vagaries of language and dispensing with common sense and reason, while, according to another, his opinions are little short of inspiration, and his

eloquence unbounded as his genius. We confess, that in reading the first few pages, we were not a little inclined to adopt the former opinion, and yet, after perusing the whole of this extraordinary work, we can allow, almost to their fullest extent, the high qualities with which Mr. Carlyle's idolaters endow him.

Thackeray's admiration for Addisonian English, however, will not permit him to give much countenance to the "Germanisms and Latinisms, strange epithets, and choking double words" which so astonish "those who love history as it gracefully runs in Hume, or struts pompously in Gibbon." "But these hardships," continues Thackeray, "become lighter as the traveller grows accustomed to the road and he speedily learns to admire and sympathise; just as he would admire a Gothic cathedral in spite of the quaint carvings and hideous images on door and buttress."

Notwithstanding these disfiguring grotesque conceits and images, the book manifestly took a strong hold upon Thackeray. Some of its pages he confesses to having read with "breathless interest." The book, in general, "betrays most extraordinary powers—learning, observation, humor." And one other quality is stamped upon it, which especially appealed to the sworn foe of shams, which Thackeray, no less than Carlyle, assuredly was, namely—*sincerity*. "Above all, it has no CANT." Such a judgment upon his work must have greatly pleased Carlyle. His war, all his life, in all his utterances, was upon this odious thing. His most deeply felt prayer was that he might be honest in his work—honest as the mason is who builds a wall that endures until the tooth of time eats away the very stone.

Thackeray was by no means blind to any of the faults of the *French Revolution*, whether they were of the eccentric style or of the substance. For an unqualified admiration and understanding of the book he thinks an initiation in metaphysics necessary; especially must one have "passed the veil of Kantian philosophy." But it is even here not all caviare to the common. The work "teems with sound, hearty philosophy." The transcendentalisms of it—let them pass as unintelligible. The

book "possesses genius, if any book ever did. It wanted no more for keen critics to cry fie upon it!"

The *London Quarterly Review*, September, 1840, devotes thirty pages to the *Essays*, the *French Revolution*, *Sartor Resartus*, and *Chartism*. The writer expresses strong disapprobation both of the style and the substance of Carlyle's works: "His writings profess to be on subjects of ethics, philosophy, and religion, and yet, notwithstanding a plausible phraseology scattered here and there, they make no profession of definite Christianity." Indeed, his religion is no better than Pantheism and from that no good can come, but evil only. From this point of view Carlyle is judged throughout his several books. Much to assent to and approve of is found, but the system of thought, or, if not system, school, is energetically denounced. The writer sees in the *French Revolution* a specific illustration of this pernicious way of thinking. He thus writes:—

He has treated the French Revolution, according to his metaphor, as the outbreak of a volcano, as a necessary result of certain combinations of circumstances, like the conjunction of certain gasses with certain metals, ending in a natural explosion; and in so doing, not only is his historical view miserably defective, but his morality is erroneous and pernicious. There is an absence in all his moral reasonings of the two principal elements of our moral nature, a sense of shame, and a sense of indignation at sin. If we might use the two Greek words, which will bring this remark home to those who are acquainted with the Greek philosophy, he has little *Αἰδώς* and no *Νέμεσις*.

The *Morning Chronicle*, 1840, contained a review by Joseph Mazzini, which is included in his *Life and Writings*, Vol. IV. It is a very elaborate study of Carlyle's conception of society.

Such was the diversity of opinion regarding Carlyle's *French Revolution*.

A summary of results would stand as follows: Only the *Literary Gazette* fails to give the author credit for serious intentions and deep earnestness. Only the *London Quarterly* discovers an immoral tendency in his philosophy. As regards the author's style, all the reviewers comment upon its singularity, and some praise while most condemn. The epic quality of the work

is discerned by several of the reviewers and they judge of it somewhat as they would of a poem rather than as a history. Greatness and permanence are allowed it, except by the flippant critic of the *Literary Gazette*, who sees in it only a tiresome literary curiosity.

The *French Revolution* cannot be said to have met either with much adverse criticism or with neglect. On the contrary, it was rated very high, it was extolled as a book of extraordinary power and of high poetic merit, by several of the leading critical journals of the day. It made an extraordinary impression on the leading spirits of the time, especially upon those poetically endowed. Some of the foremost periodicals of the day took no notice of it whatever. Among these were the *Edinburgh Review*, in which Carlyle had made his first appearance as an author, and the *Foreign Quarterly*, which had besought him for contributions at the outset of his career. *Blackwood's*, also, makes no mention of it. The *Quarterly Review* does no more than to announce it among the "New Publications." Returning to the weeklies, the *Atlas*, November 5, 1837, has a long and highly commendatory review of Schoberl's translation of Thiers' *History of the French Revolution*, incidentally praising also Mignet's. Surely this was an occasion for mentioning Carlyle's recent work, had there been a disposition on the part of the reviewer to do so. But he does nothing of the kind. And what makes the omission the more remarkable is that, after lauding these works as the two most remarkable histories of the French Revolution that have been published, the writer proceeds to characterize that of Thiers' in the very language which has been commonly considered, by unbiased readers, as most fittingly describing the work of the Scotchman. "Vividness of delineation," "dramatic spirit," "picturesqueness,"—these expressions undoubtedly suggest Carlyle to one who is reading a review of any history of the event which he has dealt with in so eminently a dramatic and picturesque manner.

In American periodicals I have discovered but one review of the book that is engaging our attention. This occurred in the *Democratic Review*, July, 1838. The article has the tone of the more favorable British reviews, that of the *Westminster*, for ex-

ample. Its character can best be shown by a few extracts, rather than by description. Its opening sentences intentionally face both ways. "This is the most extraordinary book of the day"—thus it starts out. The writer then proceeds to explain, as he feels it necessary to do, that he has not used the ambiguous expression as old Fuseli was accustomed to do when to his noble patrons he would say of their pictures, "Very extraordinary, indeed, my lord, very extraordinary,"—meaning "extraordinary *bad*." "Our meaning," the writer proceeds to say, "is that it is both extraordinary bad and extraordinary good." The writer's meaning is soon made plain in very emphatic language. Such "wild uncouthness" characterizes the style that it may be called "a French Revolution of language." This is the "extraordinary bad." Two pages are devoted to its severe reprobation. The "established formulas of expression he tramples in the dust" and "chooses to riot in a most fantastic revelry of confusion." This severity is meted out, the writer explains, because he apprehends "great injury to the language from the numerous imitators that are likely to spring up under so striking and brilliant an example."

As for "the inner substance or spirit" of the work, that is "extraordinary good." Like the English reviewers, the writer pronounces the work to be a poem,—*"for though under the garb of prose and under the formal title of history, the work before us is a poem, and nothing else,—like the immortal Epic to which Homer's title has been disputed, a connected series of rhapsodies, all of surpassing sublimity and blended into a most wondrous harmonious whole."* Its character is further given in the following language, wherein the writer, in spite of himself, makes a fatal admission regarding the style:—

Taking the whole aggregate of materials before him as free at his disposal, and as already equally in possession of himself and his reader or hearer, he selects out of the entire mass the particular fact, word, or thing that involves most significantly the essential type or the predominant idea he seeks to embody; and throws them together into such

groups and series of groups as may exhibit with the most impressive dramatic effect the true moral, as contradistinguished from the mere physical, history of the subject,—touching, every here and there, the outlines thus rapidly struck off, with an intensely luminous pencil, that flashes a world of suggested meaning, in contrast with the blackest shadows which the imagination may indulge itself at will in filling up without ever exhausting their depth. [Certain it is that Carlyle himself never wrote such an abominable sentence. But to continue, for the sake of the writer's admission regarding the style.] We have even to confess that that very uncouthness and abruptness of style which we have already so strongly reprobated, sometimes contribute to increase this remarkable effect of the pictures that he draws, in a manner entirely peculiar and original, and startling and striking beyond description.

After fourteen pages of comment and quotation the reviewer breaks off with the promise to resume in the next number. The next number should have been August, but Volume II closes with the July number, in which this part appears, and Volume III opens with the September number. But it is of no moment whatever whether the writer reached the intended conclusion of his remarks or not.

America, it is well known, gave Carlyle's early writings a much heartier reception than England did, but notwithstanding this I am not able to find that this particular work excited any great interest. It was rather *Sartor Resartus* and the miscellaneous essays that did this.

ROBERT T. KERLIN.

Lexington, Virginia.